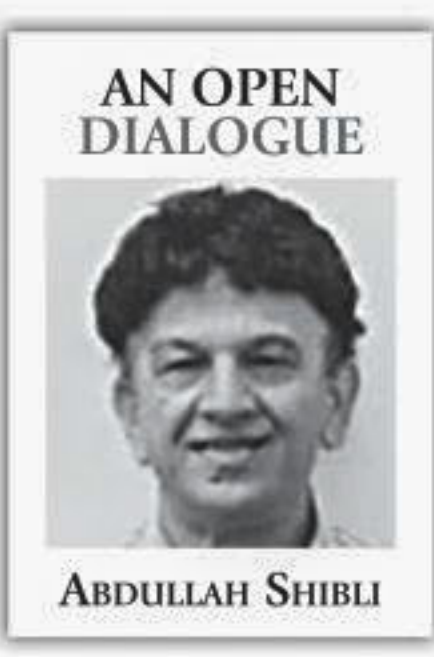


On the road to prosperity

Critical policy challenges for the upcoming decade



AN OPEN DIALOGUE
ABDULLAH SHIBLI

BANGLADESH has made phenomenal progress in the last two decades in terms of improving the standard of living of the masses. Be that as it may, we are not going to rest on our laurels

years for various forms of support to prop up the industry. The incumbent president of BGMEA is seeking assistance from the banks, government, and global supply chain. "In the last 5 months, more than 40 factories have closed down and over 25,000 workers have lost their jobs," she wrote in an op-ed in *The Daily Star*. BGMEA officials have stated in no uncertain terms last week that the industry is running at a loss. The BGMEA chief has blamed external forces including competition, downward pressure on price, and uncertain global sourcing trends for the downward spiral.

once again. Turning to the lack of diversity, IMF last year suggested that further progress in diversifying exports is critical to sustaining strong and inclusive growth. USAID's Comprehensive Private Sector Assessment (PSA) identified 16 emerging sectors including agribusiness (food processing), healthcare, information and communications technology and outsourcing, light engineering, pharmaceuticals, and tourism as some of the most promising industries beyond the ready-made garments (RMG) sector for private sector engagement and investment. It is imperative for the various

out of control. And all of these are the outcomes of inefficiency, negligence, a lack of accountability and in many cases corrupt practices of people related with the projects, according to a report in this newspaper ("Mega but slow: Poor planning, uncertainty over funds take toll on big projects"). Lax project management and poor oversight has repeatedly been identified as the Achilles heels of almost all public infrastructure projects.

For years on end, our budget has been quite miserly in its allocation for health and education, including manpower development. According to some experts, Bangladesh ought to allocate six percent of its GDP for education and three percent of its GDP for health. This means that these shares deserve to be doubled. The current budget allocation for both is way below the global trajectory in these sectors in low- and middle-income countries. "With such a poor public spending record in education and health, it is impossible for Bangladesh to register substantial progress towards attaining SDGs by 2030," according to professor Selim Raihan of Dhaka University.

A final word of caution for our leaders and policymakers. Some have been paying too much attention to increasing our GDP growth rate at the expense of other social objectives and national aspirations. "We are aiming to achieve the double-digit growth as quickly as possible through timely implementation of all nationally important infrastructure projects including megaprojects", the finance minister said in his budget speech.

A study done by Harvard Business School's professor Erik Werker shows that countries that achieved a period of double-digit growth fared poorly when contrasted with those that achieved 6-7 percent GDP increase. Statistical tests showed that the former group lagged in the following metrics: amount of FDI received, investment, export growth, industrial composition, and public spending on education. These growth-chasers, to coin a new phrase, have not generally conducted the sorts of reforms to the legal, regulatory, and governance environment that could have generated higher growth. They have also not generally invested their rents well in infrastructure or human capital.

Dr Abdullah Shibli is an economist and works in information technology. He is Senior Research Fellow, International Sustainable Development Institute (ISDI), a think-tank in Boston, USA.



RMG industry, foreign media has once again started to raise questions regarding: i) The safety record of the RMG sector; ii) Working conditions in the factories; and iii) Wages paid in the RMG sector. *The Wall Street Journal* in its October 24 edition ran a big front-page story about Amazon's dealings with Bangladesh's garments industry. In the investigative report, published under the banner, "Amazon Sells Clothes From Factories Other Retailers Blacklist", the WSJ detailed some of the practices in a few of the units labelled "dangerous plants in Bangladesh". BGMEA soon posted a rejoinder on its Facebook page, but the story ought to be an eye-opener for all,

ministries to act in coordination to boost these sectors. The country needs to address some of the lingering issues that have become a drag on private investment and foreign capital inflows. Tax revenues in Bangladesh are currently low at 9 percent of GDP, and the country needs more revenues to finance infrastructure investment and social spending. Foreign direct investment (FDI) has been impacted by red tape, an uncertain policy regime, poor infrastructure, and lack of transparency. The costs of many infrastructure projects, including the Padma Bridge and the Dhaka-Chattogram road links, are spiralling

Myanmar at ICJ

A decisive step long overdue

THE Gambia has filed a case against Myanmar with the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on behalf of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). Such a decisive step by the OIC has been long overdue. We also applaud the Gambian Justice Minister Mr Abubacar Tambadou for his initiative. Indeed, the time has come to hold the Myanmar state and its officials accountable, a cause that should have been taken up by the international community long ago, but wasn't. This comes in the backdrop of the UN Independent Fact-Finding Mission in September that produced a list of names of those the UN believes to be directly involved in the crackdown on the Rohingyas that resulted in some 750,000 of them fleeing Myanmar into Bangladesh.

Both Gambia and Myanmar are signatories to the 1948 Genocide Convention which explicitly prohibits states from committing genocide, but also compels all signatory states to prevent and punish the crime. That Gambia filed the case rests on the fact that Mr Tambadou has worked for decades as a lawyer at the UN tribunal that dealt with the Rwanda genocide in 1994. Genocide experts believe that the failure of the international community to hold the Myanmar government accountable merely reinforced its belief that it had succeeded in its efforts to cleanse the land of Rohingyas. Myanmar has been enjoying a sense of impunity, but that could all change, since the International Criminal Court (ICC) has also started investigating crimes against the Rohingyas. The filing of the case by Gambia is in fact, a step in the right direction towards justice. Inaction against such blatant genocidal acts will not only encourage Myanmar to replicate its pernicious acts against its own minorities but also other states of Myanmar's ilk to do the same.

Extend all help to the train crash victims

Remove the causes of the accident

WE are deeply shocked at the deadly train accident that happened on November 12 in Brahmanbaria's Kashba upazila which killed at least 16 people and injured a hundred others. The accident occurred when Chattogram-bound Udayan Express from Sylhet and Dhaka-bound Turna Nishita Express from Chattogram collided at Mondobhag Railway Station in Kashba around 3am.

Now what the government should do on a priority basis, apart from rescuing the passengers and treating the injured, is identify the exact reasons for the fatal accident. We have learnt that already three probe committees have been formed to investigate the incident—two by railways ministry and one by district administration. We hope that the committees will submit their reports as soon as possible. Primary investigations have found that it was the Turna Nishita Express's loco master's fault. After the crash, both the loco master of Turna Nishita Express and his assistant have been suspended. However, other factors that might have contributed to the accident should also be found out.

According to a report by Shipping and Communication Reporters Forum (SCRF), between January 1 and June 30 this year, there have been at least 202 rail accidents that claimed 209 lives. The SCRF has also identified five major reasons behind the rise in rail accidents—use of mobile phones by pedestrians while crossing rail lines, lack of pedestrians' awareness, negligence of railway employees, poor maintenance of level crossings, and poor maintenance of rail lines and bridges. All these factors should be addressed by the railway authorities to curb future train accidents. Railway used to be the safest mode of public transport. But over the years, Bangladesh Railway has lost its reputation because of incompetence, mismanagement and corruption in the sector. And yesterday's accident is just a manifestation of our weakened railway sector run by incompetent manpower. The government should take all the necessary measures to turn the railway into a safe mode of transport again.

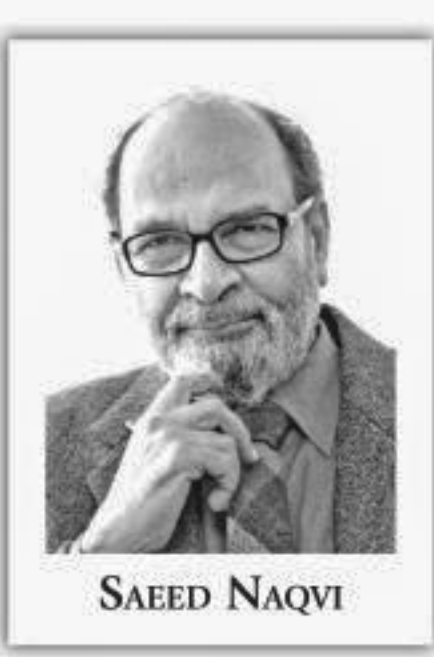
but continue to march forward since we have many more milestones to cross in the coming decades. Soon, we are hoping to step into the threshold for middle-income status, and then go all-out to reach the goals set out in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) initiative. The prime minister of Bangladesh, during her visit to India in late October, declared that she is confident that Bangladesh will advance to reach the developed country status by 2041.

Sounds ambitious? What are some of the roadblocks that we need to overcome and how do we make sure we don't get tripped by unforeseen traps laid out on our road to prosperity? According to an ADB report, our growth is precariously hanging in the balance in spite of rising buoyant exports and remittances, and accelerated growth is hindered by poor monetary policy, lacklustre private investment, and out-of-control infrastructure projects.

One possible way to conceptualise the challenges ahead is to visualise some "what if" scenarios and then look for alternatives that would allow us to continue on our journey, even at the expense of mid-course corrections to our roadmap, if you will. I will briefly touch upon three challenges, viz. a lack of diversity in our production base, the much-discussed investment gap, and the low level of spending on health and education.

The most difficult challenge in the coming years is going to be to diversify our economy to get out of our overwhelming reliance on a single sector, the ready-made garments, for employment generation, GDP growth, and to fill our foreign exchange coffers. While it might sound a little paranoid to even mention that our boom days are in jeopardy or even might end if the bottom falls out of the RMG sector, many insiders have already started to ring the alarm bell. BGMEA has already sounded the call for battle and has been asking the government for the last two

Your lordships have turned upon a community in a daze



SAEED NAQVI

YOUR Lordships have turned upon a community in a daze. Altaf Hussain Hali's verse comes to mind:

"Kisi bekus ko ai bedad gar mara to kya mara?"
Jo khud hi mara raha ho usko gar mara to kya mara?"

(What valour is there in turning upon the meek?)

Or those who are by themselves running out of life?) Your mediation effort has provided oxygen to those who are now, quite justifiably, picking holes in what you have delivered as a judgement. This is more grist to the Mill of those in pursuit of the Hindu Rashtra by 2025, centenary of the RSS. By way of digression, let's reflect on the following:

"Beautiful Aheliya, who had turned to stone because of a curse, came back to her gorgeous self when, you, O'Lord, touched the stone; you transformed one from the animal kingdom into your most trusted, Hanuman; you humanised a demon. When will you ever bestow your boon on me?" The one seeking a boon from Rama is Abdul Rahim Khan e-Khana (1556-1627), one of Moghul Emperor Akbar's most powerful courtiers and contemporary of Tulsidas, author of *Ramayana*. What is more, this shloka by Rahim is in Sanskrit. The two were in correspondence on subjects of common interest, including a poetic metre, much favoured by Tulsid—Barvai chhand.

How would Rahim, a remarkable poet in Awadhi and Sanskrit, have regarded what their Lordships dished out on Ayodhya? Indeed, what would have been the reaction of my mother, who accompanied me to Ayodhya in 1989 to watch the Shilanyas or brick laying ceremony ordered by Rajiv Gandhi? She found Ayodhya a temple-town where a mosque on the ground claimed by Hindus as the birth place of Rama was an "incongruity".

According to her, a Muslim could spread out his prayer-mat in the direction of Mecca anywhere and say his "namaz". A Hindu consecrates his "idol", which then lives in the temple eternally. Muslims must withdraw from the "masjid e fitna", or a mosque of conflict. Likewise, the Gyanvapi Mosque in Kashi and Shahi Idgah in Mathura.

Varanasi, he would require minimal sensitivity to see that the Gyanvapi masjid insults the Hindu. It sits on the shoulder of one of Hinduism's three most important shrines—Kashi Vishwanath Mandir.

The temple lights must have cast a spell on Urdu's finest poet, Mirza Ghalib. He wrote his longest poem "Chiragh e dair", "Mandir ka diya", or the Lamp in the Temple.

No description of Kashi Vishwanath would be complete without the strains of Bismillah Khan's Shehnai. The first Independence Day celebrations in 1947 at the Red Fort would certainly have been

of the Art of Living, led the trio appointed by the Supreme Court to explore possible mediation between the parties to the Ayodhya dispute. He is someone I have known. I shared with him my sense of how Muslims feel.

First, the anti-Muslim slant on most channels pushes the community into their laager, not the best corner from where to consider compromises. The post 9/11 Islamophobia provides a canopy under which regional anti-Muslim bias finds oxygen.

Secondly, there is no uniform profile of an Indian Muslim—Mapilla in Kerala, Labbai in Tamil Nadu, Bengali Muslims

harden the saffron that much more.

The trick of casting Muslims as the foil for saffronising the atmosphere has advanced Hindutva to a stunning 353 seats in a Lok Sabha of 543. So successful has the strategy been in the context of Ayodhya that the BJP would have to be as inept as the Congress not to pitch its Hindutva even higher.

The march towards Hindu Rashtra has quickened but sensible folk have not given up. They are still talking of compromises. The ailing cleric, Saiyid Kalbe Sadiq has repeatedly said, "Muslims should gift the land for the temple even if they win the case." This mood of



Indian Supreme Court in New Delhi, India.

PHOTO: ANUSHREE FADNAVIS/REUTERS

incomplete without the strains of Kafi from the very same Shehnai.

Against the backdrop of so much cultural commerce and adoration for the land, its civilisation one learnt to discard the warts of history. Yes, mosques in Ayodhya, Kashi and Mathura would hurt Hindus in perpetuity, some of us have long believed. But it is extremely difficult for a community, sliding down a slope of status reversal, to check its trajectory and scream: "We want to be generous; gift those three to the Hindus." But they can be guided by deft messaging and an open-minded leadership, not middlemen hawking religion.

At this stage, I hope I will be forgiven if I break a confidence. Sri Sri Ravishankar

would have a response on Ayodhya many shades different from the Muslims impaled in the cow belt. But, even so, if the self-appointed leaders of Muslims can somehow be circumvented, there may be traction for new ideas. Some well-meaning friends discussed an audacious idea: supposing a comprehensive opinion poll was undertaken to gauge what compromise formula would be acceptable to all sides, Muslims particularly.

Muslims have learnt the hard way that, by digging their heels in for the mosque, they have provided the exact foil for Hindutva to catapult itself into the stratosphere. Each time the known pro-mosque enthusiasts raise their voices, the media finds just the decibel level to help

generosity and compromise would have been encapsulated for the opinion poll on which my friend, pollster Ranjit Chib, had already started working. Unavoidable constraints came in the way.

Your Lordships have frozen the spirit of generosity which was stirring in Muslim enclaves. You have commanded them to acquiesce, not urged them to give. People were working towards a happier conclusion. What was so sacrosanct about the deadline for the judgement? Was it choreographed to coincide with the Kartarpur corridor event? A little more time would have gone a long way towards making the right kind of history.

Saeed Naqvi is a senior Indian journalist, television commentator and interviewer.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Everything for riders, nothing for drivers?

Ever since ridesharing services came to Dhaka, it has gained steady momentum over time. Why wouldn't it? It provided a much-required service that remained unaddressed for a long period of time. However, it seems that whatever benefits the service has provided are mostly aimed at the riders exclusively, without much concern for the drivers of the vehicles.

Some of the serious problems we as drivers face include security issues, percentage of commission, bar on working hours, among many others. Dhaka Ridesharing Drivers Union even took steps to voice the drivers' demands, but in vain.

It is evident that these ridesharing service companies barely take note of our recurring difficulties. As long as the riders are happy and safe, nothing else seems to matter.

I wonder why they fail to realise the fact that drivers are as important to the service as the users? The current circumstances are taking a toll on the majority of the drivers. How long can a business be sustained in such a manner? I urge the authorities to give us some importance and solve the issues that we suffer from.

Sohel, A ridesharing service driver in Dhaka

